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Truth, Purification and Power:

Foucault's genealogy of purity and impurity in and after the *Will to Know* lectures

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Abstract

Foucault's 1970-1971 lectures at the Collège de France, *The Will to Know*, highlight the significance of themes of purity and impurity in Western thought. Reflecting on these themes coincided with the emergence of Foucault's theory of power. This paper presents the first analysis of Foucault's investigation of purity and impurity in the *Will to Know* lectures, identifying the distinctive theory Foucault offers of purity as a discursive apparatus addressing correspondence between the subject and the truth through the image of relative integrity or mixture. It then traces Foucault's subsequent reflections on these themes in his later writings on disciplinary power. The implications of Foucault's position are considered; the paper will close by putting Foucault's ideas in dialogue with those of Kristeva, and in considering the role purity and impurity may play in resistance.

Keywords: Foucault, essentialism, impurity, truth, Kristeva

Purity and impurity discourses play an important role in the figuration of subjectivities, practices and materialities across a variety of domains. There is growing scholarly recognition of the significance of these themes, albeit in the face of an undertow of assumptions which presume purity and impurity to be characteristic only of pre-modern societies. By contrast, the contemporary relevance of the study of purity and impurity was highlighted by the recent global Slut Walks, a series of demonstrations against rape culture. These were triggered when a policeman in Toronto told students that women should avoid ‘dressing like sluts’ in public spaces in order to protect themselves from sexual assault by men: ‘The drums banged, the crowd yelled: “Hey hey, ho ho, yes means yes and no means no. Whatever I wear, wherever I go, yes means yes and no means no”’ (Mills & Angelina 2011). Reclaiming the word ‘slut’ – etymologically someone who is dirty or slovenly – in public spaces was an attempt to highlight and express anger that the Madonna/whore dichotomy remains active as an injunction upon women not to appear sexually impure in a society in which dominant discourses assert that gender equality has already been achieved (Duschinsky 2013). Yet questions were raised about whether the impurity imputed to female sexuality could be contested in this way. Greer (2011), for example, argued that ‘these “slut walk” women are simply fighting for their right to be dirty’, since the term ‘slut’ cannot be re-signified successfully: the history of association between female sexuality and impurity is too strong, as are the imbrications of this association with constructions of racial impurity and working-class impropriety (Jones 2011; Black Woman’s Blueprint 2011). Purity discourses regarding female sexuality are entrenched as part of the software which organise and regulate raced and classed apparatuses. If this is so, then one cannot meaningfully choose to ‘reclaim’ and positively valorise the position of impurity – that would not be within the power of an individual or even a movement. To try to do so would risk confirming, rather than contesting, the discursive and affective hold of purity and impurity regimes.

Such assessment of femininity and female practices in terms of purity has been a particular spur to work interrogating these themes by researchers oriented by feminist concerns and intersectionist approaches (e.g. Haraway 1991; Lugones 1994). Yet the wider contemporary significance of purity and impurity discourses has also been documented by other scholars, who have traced and examined the role of purity and impurity discourses

across a wide variety of disciplines. For instance Hughes (2005), writing in the *Journal of Public Affairs*, highlights the significance of purity and impurity discourses in contemporary society. Analysing media texts addressing the issues of genetic engineering, she interrogates the role of purity and impurity discourses in shaping public opinion not only about genetic engineering but also about immigration to Britain. Hughes (2005: 256) demonstrates that in discussions of genetic engineering ‘notions of purity and contamination are very important, with 33% of articles using the words “contamination”, “pure” or “purity”’, and that these notions are then subtly crosshatched so that perpendicular to the main narrative about science runs a tale of the threat to national purity from asylum seekers.

Theories of purity and impurity have emerged from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology (e.g. Steiner 1956), sociology (e.g. Elias [1939] 2000), philosophy (e.g. Agamben [1995] 1998) and cognitive science (e.g. Rozin et al. 2008). Of particular significance across the social sciences and humanities have been two major attempts to integrate theory between disciplines. Douglas’ classic theory of ‘dirt as matter out of place’ integrated developments in anthropology, religious studies and cognitive science. Douglas ([1966] 2002: 48) proposed that impurity will come to characterise phenomena under ‘two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order’. Kristeva integrated psychoanalytic and linguistic insights in building upon Douglas’ position, forming what is perhaps the dominant theory of the topic to date. She conceptualises ‘abjection’ as a quality given to phenomena which are experienced as disturbing the categorical boundaries of the social subject. It ‘preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’ (Kristeva [1980] 1982: 10). The ‘in-between, ambiguous or composite’, the abject registers a weakness in these categorical boundaries, and elicits disgust or the construction of ritual as a way of re-stabilising the integrity of the subjective and social organisation (ibid. 3). For example, Kristeva suggests that menstrual blood registers the arbitrariness of our supposedly natural body boundaries, and that the abjection of menstrual blood re-affirms the naturalness of bounded identity - and hence an organisation of sexed subjects. She offers no sense that female sexuality or reproduction can or will ever be untangled from purity and impurity regimes, though these may change over time and range in their intensity and organisation.

Kristeva presents a history, looking at the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in particular, in which purity and impurity discourses emerged initially within religious discourses as a way of hypostatizing the possibility of disturbance to our categories in

representations of material things, people and subjective states as impure. She explores, for instance, the ritual impurity associated with the birth of a girl in the Hebrew bible, and the subjective experience of sin in the New Testament, as cases where the dynamic of abjection is made to occur in an organised, managed way within the symbolic order. In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, Kristeva ([1996] 2000: 21) therefore characterises her account as in full agreement with Mary Douglas' 'first rule' of impurity: 'the impure is that which does not respect boundaries'. For Kristeva, purity and impurity discourses 'provide a social symbolic elaboration of the unstable border of the self and society', ritually encapsulating this instability in the form of disgust for particular things or forms of subjectivity (Beadsworth 2004: 120). As such, Kristeva ([1996] 2000: 20) proposes, purity and impurity have a 'capital importance' as a topic for inquiry because these understudied themes at the border of self and society shape our perceptions of each other and of the organisation of oppression.

Calls by scholars including Douglas and Kristeva for further integrative thinking on the topic (e.g. Douglas 1997; Kristeva 2004; O'Brien 2006) have begun to be answered by attempts to sustain new syntheses of disciplinary approaches (e.g. Simon 2012). Work to integrate these advances has been scaffolded by recent international conferences and symposia and by their published proceedings (e.g. Wellcome Trust 2011; Rösch & Simon 2012). As well as standing on its own terms as a reading of an unexamined theme in the work of a major social theorist, another goal of this paper is to contribute indirectly to this interdisciplinary conversation. Foucault is a key figure for discussions of purity and power across sociology, anthropology, geography and in feminist theorising, providing perhaps something of a common ground. Douglas (1980) herself emphasised that the work of Foucault on the relationship between power and truth could be a potent resource in further advancing the position she proposed in *Purity and Danger*. Yet no analysis of Foucault's remarks on the topic has appeared to date, and scholars have tended to assume that he assimilates defilement into a generic account of Othering, without showing attention to its particular processes.

Whilst purity and impurity are not major themes in Foucault's writings, there are several significant reflections on the topic, particularly in the 1970-1971 lectures at the Collège de France, *The Will to Know*, which have recently been published in English translation for the first time. Something remarkable about this lecture course, as Behrent highlights in his review article, is that 'Foucault addresses an issue that is at the heart of this course, yet which appears only rarely, if at all, in his other writings: conceptions of... ritual

impurity' (Behrent 2012: 159). This article, for the first time, pieces together the somewhat scattered analysis Foucault presents in *The Will to Know* lectures of purity and impurity. After presenting an account of Foucault's genealogy of purity in these lectures, the article traces Foucault's subsequent reflections in his later writings on various purity discourses, including discourses relating to truth, race and the body. Indeed, even before the publication of the *Will to Know* lectures, Meltzer (2001: 44) could state with confidence that the 'concept of total purity... fascinates Foucault'. The article will close by putting Foucault's reflections in dialogue with those of Kristeva, whose attention to the topic has been important and influential for contemporary inquiry. It is not possible in this article to fully draw out the interdisciplinary ramifications of Foucault's reflections on purity, but this dialogue is intended to illustrate their potential fruitfulness. It will be argued that Foucault's particular contribution lies in attending specifically to the genealogy and implications of purity not as merely a residual category - 'that which is not in-between, ambiguous or composite' - but as a discursive apparatus, contingent but institutionally-embedded, which compares subjects to their imputed essential truth. The implications of this perspective for thinking about resistance will be drawn out in the conclusion.

### **Purity in *The Will to Know***

Foucault ([1971a] 2013: 3-4) sets out his aim in the *Will to Know* lecture series as an examination of the emergence, within a 'network of constraints and dominations', of the 'will that lays down and imposes the truth/error system', particularly as applied to discourses on true and deviant forms of human life. Conducting his first genealogy, Foucault traces the origins of the idea that a 'will to truth' is a natural possession of every human to Aristotle, and argues that the fabrication of this 'will to know' has made knowledge seem unconnected to power-relations and social and material forces. A core component of this genealogy is the study of the emergence of discourses of purity in forensic procedures in Greece between the seventh and fifth centuries. As he highlighted in his course summary for 1970-1971, Foucault observed something curious about this conceptualisation of truth: that its 'discovery... holds a *purificatory value*', and that this quality of purity as attached to truth 'was to be decisive in the history of Western knowledge' ([1971a] 2013: 228). In his lectures, Foucault looks into this dimension as the path to unpicking and analysing the cultural specificity of Western discourse on truth, in its 'emergence, function, distribution and necessary form in Greek

society' (ibid. 71). It is perhaps notable that, with purity, power and knowledge as the constellation under investigation, genealogy is formulated as a method which serves to show that 'the origin of things is not the identity, unity or purity of an uncontaminated essence, but rather the laceration, the multiplicity, and the alteration of something that never corresponds to that which it declares to be' (Esposito [2004] 2008: 80).

Foucault begins his history by acknowledging that 'purification is an archaic rite' (ibid. 167). Yet his analysis focuses on cultural and historical discontinuities, and in doing so marks a departure from prior phenomenological analyses of purification, such as Van der Leeuw ([1933] 1986: 343), in which the same process 'characterises all ideas about purification: a new beginning is made, power thrust out and fresh potency drawn in'. His approach also contrasts with that of Douglas ([1966] 2002: 43), writing in the same period under the influence of functionalism and structuralism, for whom 'the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail'. This difference in approach can be situated in terms of Foucault's methodological and philosophical concern to analyse discourses of contemporary concern in terms of their condition of emergence, and in doing so to show that they formed within a context which both shows their potential contingency and which reduces the obviousness of their legitimacy. It can also be situated in the intellectual context of France in the 1970s. As Bourg (2007) has documented, in the early 1970s reproductive rights came to the fore in French intellectual and public debate, problematising the intersection of themes of sex, inviolability and impurity, and raising questions regarding criminality/innocence regarding sexual violence. Foucault's approach and concerns can also, perhaps, be situated in relation to thinkers such as Bataille, who had used the language of purity and impurity in reflecting on the lack of integrity of the knowing subject.

Foucault ([1971a] 2013: 167) argues that, between the seventh and fifth centuries, purification as an archaic rite became 'articulated on two oppositions which were originally foreign to it: criminality/innocence [and] ignorance/knowledge'. Foucault conducts an analysis of the specific logic of the Greek purificatory rites prior to this shift, and notes that 'abolution is called for when one passes from an ordinary or daily activity to a ritual activity' but that 'it is not a matter of cleaning a sin' (ibid. 168). Yet 'the role of religion as justification of the new political power makes possible the integration of these religious qualities of the individual in the legal system of the State. Pure and impure will now be distributed by the State' (ibid. 175). In new forensic procedures, the archaic rite of

purification became articulated with the dimensions of criminality/innocence and ignorance/knowledge. When a judge discloses the truth through his sentence regarding monetised restitution, ‘the sentence will have to express... the just and the true, that which is fitted to the order of the world and things, and which restores this very order when it has been disturbed’ (ibid. 120).

Foucault identifies three areas of law - inheritance, funerary rites and murder - where discourses of purity and impurity were particularly crucial to the construction of the legal subject who would parallel and support the civil subject associated with ‘the birth of a monetary economy’ and ‘the formation of a new type of political power’ (ibid. 175). The stakes in all three of these areas of law were the social effects of death. For example, following a murder it was decreed that retaliatory murder within the city was not permitted because ‘homicide (except in cases of legitimate defence) gives rise to a qualitative impurity in the person who committed it... this impurity is dangerous and intolerable for the city’ (ibid. 178). Instead of retaliation by those who have been wronged, the murderer must undergo trial – and sentencing to exile (as in the case of Sophocles’ Oedipus). Foucault observes that ‘previously death gave rise to purification due to the passage’ from life to death, necessitating religious rituals to manage this passage; the new juridical procedures mean that ‘death gives rise to defilement’, provides a pretext for proceedings in order to find out what happened, and legal ‘judgement or reconciliation take on the value of purification’ as they apportion power and wealth within the city (ibid. 178). Foucault therefore suggests that impurity has, in this way, gained a negative moral valence in its association with guilt – just as purity has gained a positive moral valence by virtue of its association with legitimate judgement about the ‘very order of the world’ ([1971a] 2013: 191). The result is that ‘the juridical-religious superimposition of crime and purity entails a new relationship to the truth’, a ‘purity-disclosure of order relation’ (ibid. 182, 189).

Foucault situates purity as a key discursive apparatus in making the organisation and apportionment of power within the city appear natural and right. Fleshing out an insight briefly suggested in ‘A Preface to Transgression’ ([1963] 1999: 59), impurity is situated as a mark of the person who deviates from the ‘most fundamental *nomos*’ which orchestrates the very truth of the city, masking the contingency of this imputed truth by devaluing deviation as a form of non-Being and expelling it from the city. As such, in the *Will to Know* lectures Foucault is suggesting that purity appears as a mere quality of true being and impurity as a mere quality of non-being, though in fact purity/impurity discourses are important resources



for the construction of being itself. Following Nietzsche, Foucault states that the idea of an ‘exact essence of things, their purest possibilities... an image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature’ is actually in part the *product* of the purity and impurity discourses that appear merely to *describe* it ([1971b] 1998: 371). He contends that the classification of human beings through purity and impurity discourses helps produce and stabilise an image of an essence, as the underlying truth of the city to which just sentencing will correspond and affirm. The sagacious figure appears capable of speaking on behalf of this politically-neutral truth, ‘a pure subject, free from determination and ready to welcome, without deformation, the presence of the object’ ([1971a] 2013: 215). Yet Foucault urges that the characterisation of correspondence with the truth as pure and difference from this correspondence as contamination and deformation should be recognised as a discursive manoeuvre organised to naturalise power: ‘we need to recognise that this is a fictitious figure behind whose mask economic and political processes continue to operate’, a point illustrated by the fact that ‘popular power is not merely ignorant. It is inevitably impure’ (ibid. 189-90).

This ‘purity-disclose of order relation’ means that purity discourses stand as guarantor of the capacity for *correspondence* between the subject’s knowledge and the essential truth of the city and the world: ‘a fictitious place was fixed where power is founded on a truth which is only accessible on guarantee of purity’ (ibid. 193). This process is supported and matched by the operation of impurity discourses, which suggest that deviation from this essential order of things is the intrusion of *heterogeneity* into a prior correspondence between humans and their truth – such as the contamination of knowledge of the world by relations of power. This knowledge guaranteed by purity ‘suspends usefulness, erases partialities and limits, and wants to see everything with an equal eye and without prejudice. Knowledge that wants to be pure’ (ibid. 209). The result has been ‘a whole ethics of truth from which we have not yet escaped (ibid. 189). Foucault sums up his analysis by observing that within the matrix of assumptions shaped by overlay of truth and purity – to which he insists we still belong – ‘the truth is what makes it possible to exclude; to separate what is dangerously mixed; to distribute the inside and outside properly; to trace the boundaries between what is pure and what is impure... A city without truth is a threatened city. Threatened by mixtures, impurities, unfulfilled exclusions. The city needs the truth as a principle of division’ (ibid. 187). Foucault’s account in the *Will to Know* thus traces the emergence of purity and impurity as tied to and support for the Greek polis, adapted from ancient ritual into a characterisation of the truth and thereby able to serve as both a source of legitimacy and as a practical means

of social ordering. In this new characterisation of knowledge adequate to the very truth of the world and the city as pure, a linkage or assimilation occurred between two images: the image of *that which essentially is* (as opposed to falseness and deviation) and the image of *the self-identical and harmoniously complete* (as opposed to mixture, conflict and difference).

### **Purity as a discursive apparatus**

In his work subsequent to the *Will to Know* lectures, Foucault continued to affirm the idea that the Greeks had enacted an important revision of ritual purity-impurity discourses into a characterisation of truth and guilt, and that this was a ‘form of power-knowledge tied to the construction of the Greek city-state’ ([1972] 1997: 17). He argued that the judicial model of truth and justice as abstract spheres in possession of full presence, unmixed and pure, ‘constituted the mould, the model on the basis of which a series of other knowledges – philosophical, rhetorical and empirical – were able to develop’ in Western thought (ibid. 34). This form of purity discourse did not dominate all Greek thought; Foucault’s account in the *Will to Know* lectures suggests that characterisations of the truth as a matter of ‘purity’ was only one discourse among others in the classical period, and that this characterisation itself changed in contingent conjunctures and disjunctures with other discourses. In the closing remarks in the manuscript of his final Collège de France lecture, Foucault emphasised the importance of the ‘work of purification’ as a discursive apparatus within Western culture, but also noted that, just as purification requires ‘an essential position of otherness’ against which a pristine ideal can be erected, there have always been discourses which have contested purity ideals in the name of a ‘battle in this world against the world’ ([1984d] 2011: 340).

Contest and disjuncture between purity discourses and other important discourses can be illustrated well by Foucault’s account, in his late work, of the intersection between purity discourses and the figure of the parrhesiast, as someone concerned to ‘tell all’ without holding anything back. Foucault does note some intersection between *parrhesia* and purity discourses: the parrhesiast themselves might sometimes be characterised as *akaraois* – pure, irreproachable – to the degree that they were not beholden to any force or value which would stop them taking the risk of speaking the truth ([1983a] 2012: 166). However, *parrhesia* as an activity was not generally coded in terms of purity and impurity. Two reasons for this can be identified in the characteristics Foucault observes of *parrhesia*. Firstly, in *parrhesia* there was no concern to refine speech to ensure the unity of its reference or themes, but rather with

speaking without reserve and as directly as possible in the face of risk. Secondly, there was no intention to speak of ‘the form of the very being of things and of the world[;] the parrhesiast intervenes, says what is, but in terms of the singularity of individuals, situations, and conjunctures’ ([1984d] 2011: 18). In line with these observations, Foucault observes that early Christian writers, highly concerned with purity, used the term *parrhesia* in a pejorative sense, of someone who is indiscriminately saying ‘anything that comes to mind’ without testing it for worth (ibid. 9) – or else they refigured the word to mean ‘something like openness of heart... a kind of ascending impulse of this pure soul which lifts it up to the Almighty’ ([1984d] 2011: 326).

Returning to Greek texts in the 1980s and re-engaging with his earlier conclusions, Foucault ([1982a] 2005: 46-7) suggested that in Plato, alongside other strands in his thinking, one can see the concern for ‘purification’ at the juncture of politics and epistemology. He distinguishes between ‘the renunciation of some things’, necessitated by philosophical priorities, and ‘a purification of existence’; whilst he argues that the latter fully characterises Christian asceticism, he sees ‘traces’ of both perspectives in Plato ([1983a] 2012: 343). Purification is not absent from the thought of Plato, for whom deviation from the truth is marked as an advance towards non-being, ‘which means that it should be understood on the double register of an impurity to be dispelled and a disease to be cured. Purification and cure are mixed together’ ([1983a] 2012: 361). This discourse can be seen in Plato’s discussion of love. The position of the young boy as both sexually passive and a future active man had led to the problematisation of the love of boys in Greek thought; Foucault’s analysis suggests that Plato shifted this problematisation so that the love of boys is revealed as really a love of truth in the soul of the beloved. As both submit their love to ‘purification’ they cease to love the body of one another and engage in a relationship of philosophy, advancing towards the truth and towards the self-mastery which was the social qualification for status and political rule ([1984a] 1985: 231-4).

As well as adding to his earlier analysis, in his later work Foucault presented historiographic reflections which clarified the relationship between Greek purity discourses and those of subsequent Western forms of knowledge. Foucault ([1984d] 2011: 246) agrees with Heidegger that the idea of a ‘pure world of truth... to which we must aspire’ has been crucial for Western philosophy and culture, shaping our conceptualisations of as varied phenomena as the material world, the human body, and society. If alongside changes there is also some continuity between the Greeks and the present, this is not due to any fateful ‘echo’

(Heidegger's [1938] 1999: 75-80) but for reasons of practice and power. The lasting resonance of Greek purity discourses in Western society is a result of the instantiation and re-activation of these themes in different practical discourses (Foucault [1980] 1999: 161). The mode in which the subject is characterised may therefore change, and these themes may become more or less consequential:

One thing that has been very important is that in Stoic ethics the question of purity was nearly nonexistent or, rather, marginal. It was important in Pythagorean circles and also in the Neoplatonic schools and became more and more important through their influence... In Christian asceticism, the question of purity becomes more and more important; the reason why you have to take control of yourself is to keep yourself pure... The paradigm of sexual self-restraint becomes a feminine paradigm through the theme of purity and virginity, based on the model of physical integrity ([1984b] 1997: 274).

In his work in the last year of his life towards the unpublished *The History of Sexuality, Volume 4*, Foucault examined the way in which purity became accentuated as a theme in the work of John Cassian, the fourth-century monastic thinker. Daniel Defert, in a personal communication, has related that in this attention to the theme of purity in Cassian, Foucault was continuing the genealogy of purity and impurity that he had begun in the 1970-1971 *Will to Know* lectures over a decade earlier. For Cassian (1985: 42), purity represented a state without mixture or disturbance, within which the subject could stand in correspondence to the divine truth. To veer for even a moment from beholding Christ is to be guilty of impurity'; indeed, 'any diversion, however impressive, must be regarded as secondary, low-grade' (ibid. 46). Cassian (1985: 106) prescribes that 'sensibility is, so to speak, absorbed by this purity. It is reshaped in the likeness of the spiritual and the angelic so that all its dealings, all its activity will be prayer, utterly pure, utterly without tarnish'. In such a prescription, the discursive formation that linked purity to the disclosure of essence which emerged with the Greeks can be observed, both revised and re-mobilised in Cassian, to serve as an apparatus of Christian asceticism. The discourse is transformed but retains important continuities, above all that 'access to truth cannot be conceived of without purity of the soul' ([1982c] 1988: 40).

Foucault is struck by the image of the money changer in Cassian, used to depict conscience as the element of the subject which assesses the Godliness of thoughts by asking

‘What is its degree of purity? Is it mixed with desire or concupiscence?’ (ibid. 47). He notes that this image of the money changer occurs too in Epictetus, but in a different form. Whereas Epictetus urges the conscience to determine whether the impression represents something which is accessible or not to his will, in Cassian the image of purity as correspondence with essence is used to depict a struggle to maintain the focus on God and avoid temptation by the Devil. The materiality of the image of purity, for example of the gold assessed by the money changer (non-corrosive, scarce, able to be polished to a sheen), thus served to anchor a theological vision and epistemology. In this discourse, purification was not merely the removal of contaminants but the approach to correspondence with the essence of the world: ‘there occurs a sort of double action, a withdrawal that also reveals’ ([1984c] 1999: 196). Foucault describes this discursive apparatus, which situates ‘the self as the ideal unity of the will and the truth’, as ‘Christianity as the cradle of Western hermeneutics of the self’ ([1980] 1999: 169). This account provides a notable alternative to the idea of the ‘ambiguity of the sacred’. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 2001: 41, 110, 250), Durkheim characterises ‘the sacred’ as an ‘essence’, universally applicable across human life, and possessing an inherent ambiguity between purity and impurity in its role as symbol variously for societal order or chaos. By contrast, in his discussion of Cassian’s theological vision, Foucault traces how the sacred is not prior to but is precisely constructed through images of purity and impurity, which address the degree of correspondence between phenomena and their essence (see Duschinsky 2014a). These conclusions parallel those of Caillois ([1950] 1959: 37) in *Man and the Sacred*, in which ‘the ambiguity of the sacred’ is analysed using Augustine who ‘explains that his horror comes about by his realisation of the absolute disparity between his being and that of the sacred, and he explains his ardour by his awareness of their fundamental identity’.

Purity, Foucault emphasises, would be capable of being utilised in different cultural and political circumstances, causing its manifestations to vary widely, and to fluctuate in salience and significance. Yet the role of purity discourse as a guarantor of a particular conceptualisation of truth remains a significant one, and was situated by Foucault as ‘decisive in the history of Western knowledge’ ([1971a] 2013: 228). This position does not imply that Foucault granted ‘purity’ any transhistorical universality, in the manner of Douglas. Foucault’s method suggests that despite continual redeployment within a variety of changing discursive formations, sufficient continuity links such modern apparatuses as ‘discipline’ or ‘purity’ to their condition of emergence that a genealogy of the latter can serve to

demonstrate the potential contingency and question the legitimacy of the former. This approach can and has been criticised as tending towards the use of constructs which are too sweeping, raising the question of whether apparatuses such as ‘discipline’ or ‘purity’ always operate in the same way or mean equivalent things (Thom 2012). This concern, raised already in Foucault’s lifetime, was readily answered by his epistemological reflections. Foucault ([1968] 1998) accepts the diversity which will exist under his analytical concepts as the price of cutting across received conceptualisations, making unexpected and potentially valuable links. This can be demonstrated by his discussion of the ‘pure life’ promised by disciplinary power to the nation and to the individual.

### **Purification biopolitics**

In his analysis of the governmentality of the modern nation-state, Foucault picks out ‘purity’ as playing a significant role as justifying and operating disciplinary power within the biopolitics of state racism and colonialism. To some degree these purity and impurity discourses have already been subject to analysis by scholars interested in Foucault’s account of state racism, such as Stone (2013). However, in these studies purity and impurity have not been the focus, so I will here briefly survey Foucault’s attention to state racism, highlighting the analysis he presents about the significance of purity as a discursive apparatus. In both continuity and discontinuity with the discourses of the Greek city-state in which the alignment between the city and its truth involved the expurgation of subjects figured as impure, the modern state framed a purification of the race as a means by which the nation could correspond to its own truth. Looking back at his earlier analyses from the vantage of the 1980s, Foucault ([1983a] 2012: 362) presents the term ‘politics of purification’, which can describe both.

In his analysis of the politics of purification of the modern nation-state, Foucault argues that discourses that speak of a competitive biological struggle between races became mobilised within disciplinary forms of national governmental intervention, via pedagogic, judicial, economic, familial and – above all – medical systems, to ensure the eugenic ‘integrity, the superiority, and the purity of the race’ ([1976a] 2003: 81; [1976b] 1978: 114-8) through designations of normal and abnormal, healthy and dangerous. Foucault insists upon the significance of these purity discourses, describing how ‘the internal racism of permanent

purification' served as 'one of the basic dimensions of social normalization' ([1976a] 2003: 62):

We are dealing with a mechanism that allows biopower to work. So racism is bound up with the workings of a State that is obliged to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of the race, to exercise its sovereign power (ibid. 258).

Foucault associates with the advent of Western modernity the rise of political discourses of population and nation which speak of race struggle within and between European countries, and between metropole and colonies. The nation was discursively constructed as a unitary, but fragile, natural whole. To the extent that this construction achieved hegemony, it necessitated and mandated manifold systems of governmentality to optimise the population, through designations of normal and abnormal, healthy and dangerous. In this way, the construction of the nation as a natural whole received its initial discursive sanction in the nineteenth century from discourses of racial purity, and in turn supported practical technologies of purification to regulate the economic, social and biological forces available to the State and to the accumulation of capital.

### **Purification within disciplinary power**

Another purity discourse in modern Western society, interleaved at points with biopolitical discourses of national purity, is figurations of subjectivity as 'identity'. Under Feudalism, the body of the sovereign had reconciled the multiplicity of relations and possible conflicts in society, bounding them and containing them. The great shift that Foucault identifies with modernity is the advent of the 'normal individual', both as the unitary whole conglomerating the bodily forces that need to be made docile for political and economic reasons, and as a constituent of a multiplicity of social relations within the wider national population. The site where these physical and social multiplicities would henceforth be reconciled was the human body and lived experience, treated as coextensive. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the body and the experiencing subject were joined in the 'chimera of a substantial unity', which symbolically transferred the boundaries of 'the body clean and true' on to an individual identity and subjectivity ([1971b] 1998; [1974] 2006: 25). This discourse frames

the living, agentic self as an integral and essential whole, capable of contamination by heterogeneity and of purification back to this originary state. Foucault sees a concern with purification as a potentially important component of the normalisation of the human subject by means of the ‘disciplinary apparatus’, an adaptation of monastic regulation of practice and subjectivity.

The disciplinary apparatus – of prisons, schools, hospitals, barracks and other communal systems – sequestered the individual from the outside world, to ensure that no physical or moral ‘contagion’ could occur ([1974] 2006: 75). Foucault contends that the presumption of a knowable, finite identity or unitary personality standing at the origin of a plurality of acts facilitated the action of the disciplinary apparatus in making the subject responsible for his or her behaviour. A new object of power-knowledge, the ‘identity’ of the individual, was in this way controlled and optimised by being placed under a constant injunction to self-manage and improve its position vis-à-vis a desired norm discursively constructed as ‘the pure life’ of ‘perfection’ ([1974] 2006: 67; [1975b] 1977: 234). Foucault would thus later observe that in contemporary Western societies this self-regulation takes a form parallel to and rooted in ‘the Christian hermeneutics of the self’, in which ‘a suspiciousness directed every moment against one’s thoughts’ is mobilised in the service of ‘expelling for good everything impure or conducive to impurity’ ([1982c] 1988: 46; [1984b] 1999: 196). Foucault suggests that within disciplinary apparatuses, the individual is subjected by the medicalisation of consciousness to an ascetic technology of self-decipherment, and the continual expurgation of ‘impure’ thoughts, desires and actions; this aims to advance the subject towards an identity between one’s self and the prescribed truth of his or her being.

In the later 1970s, Foucault turned his attention away from the totalising subjectivation aspired to by disciplinary apparatuses and towards ‘security’: the governance of population-level processes through their immanent laws. Purity and impurity do not figure as key concerns during this period of focus on the apparatus of ‘security’, except in once instance. In fact, however, the exception helps explain the pattern. Purity and impurity figure in *The Birth of Biopolitics* as Foucault discusses neo-liberal concerns to purify what are depicted as ‘natural’ market processes from ‘disruption’ by state intervention (e.g. [1979] 2008: 201). As we have seen, for Foucault purity emerged in Greek thought through the assimilation of the image of *that which originally is* (as opposed to falseness and deviation) with the image of *the self-identical and harmoniously complete* (as opposed to mixture and conflict). Besides in discussions of a reified ‘market’, purity and impurity therefore do not figure in the



discussions of ‘security’ as a mode of governmentality because what is at stake is the interplay of immanent laws in their acknowledged heterogeneity. Purity and impurity are not at stake because, within security as a discursive apparatus, heterogeneity and correspondence with essence are not generally problematised. This conclusion is supported by the fact that as Foucault turned his attention away from ‘security’ and back to the genealogical origins of disciplinary power in Christian thought in the early 1980s, he once again attends to purity. He analyses ‘technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ ([1982c] 1988: 18).

### **Concluding reflections**

The implications of Foucault’s analysis as a contribution to social theory on purity and impurity can perhaps be brought into relief through a comparison with that of Kristeva, who is widely (though not universally) perceived as the dominant social theorist of the topic. Kristeva and Foucault can be identified as in partial agreement on several dimensions of their respective discussions of purity and impurity. Three might be particularly highlighted. Firstly, both Kristeva and Foucault situate purity and impurity discourses as historically variable, though there is a difference in degree in that Kristeva ([1980] 1982: 68) is more interested in the way that beliefs about defilement are formed by the ‘specific economy of the speaking subject, no matter what its historical manifestations may be’. Both perceive something historically contingent in the predominant organisation of Western purity discourses, and identify this organisation as one based around an alignment of assessments of homogeneity/mixture with a foundationalist construction of the truth. Foucault’s analysis suggests that discourses of purity and impurity have changed dramatically since they were first initiated to supply a source of justification for the Greek polis, in his lectures on the *Will to Know*. Yet Foucault observes that the use of purity to characterise correspondence between the subject and truth has continued to be activated as a powerful apparatus and cultural form; he also suggests that this discourse on truth has undergone globalisation beyond Western societies.

Secondly, Kristeva and Foucault agree that purity discourses attend body boundaries, though they differ in the mechanism that causes this to occur. Kristeva treats the desire for a

‘clean and proper’ body as a basic fact of human phenomenology, albeit capable of different figurations, whereas Foucault attends to the forms of institutional and forensic apparatus which provide the context within which body boundaries may be inserted into the characterisation of the ‘identity’ of the subject. Kristeva ([1998] 2001: 15) agrees with Durkheim in the somewhat circular claim that the sacred has pure and impure aspects because of ‘the ambiguity of the sacred’. Foucault suggests an alternative account in which the image of ‘the sacred’ as a universal is precisely constructed through the way discourses of purity and impurity are mobilised to address the hidden truth of existence – it is this which makes the reification ‘the sacred’ appear to inherently have pure and impure faces. For example, childhood innocence is identified by Kristeva ([1980] 1982: 6) in *Powers of Horror* as sacred in its ‘pure’ aspect in Western discourses, but no explanation is given as to why this might be. Foucault’s analysis helps explain the logic of this characterisation, through his more precise attention to the way that purity and impurity discourses have been interleaved with ideas of wholeness and essence. ‘The child’s natural innocence’ has been figured as pure, contrasted to a ‘dimension of perversion’ that comes from outside, because it is understood as a period of utter identity with natural essence, before the conflictual impulses that characterise later forms of subjectivity (Foucault [1985a] 2003: 242-244). In *The Abnormal* lecture series, Foucault traces how the image of childhood innocence provided a crucial node in the biopolitical organisation of the modern family by state and welfare institutions.

Thirdly, both theorists attend to the role of purity and impurity discourses as important epistemological operators of essentialism. Kristeva emphasises that these discourses mark the distance between the categorical divisions of language and the material heterogeneity that underlies the possibility of this language and which it can never fully capture and figure. Foucault demonstrates the way in which the struggle of partial selves, violence, and desires made possible the emergence of a form of purity discourse to characterise guilt/innocence and truth/ignorance which in turn disavows this debased origin, and situates knowledge as solely a product of the human will to know. Both Kristeva and Foucault, for example, identify the important role of purity and impurity discourses in the figuration of the nation as a timeless essence underpinning its manifestations in individual citizens, and also mandating forms of gendered regulation and subjectivation to manage the reproduction of the population. Foucault’s analysis of this process is perhaps more overtly political, and less psychological than Kristeva’s, which gives his account more flexibility in unpicking the interaction and disjunctures between coexisting but differently operating

institutions and regimes (e.g. religious, juridical, political and philosophical discourses of purity and impurity).

Yet precisely associated with this inattention to the interaction and disjunctures between discourses invoking purity and impurity, Kristeva's perspective does have a particular advantage over that of Foucault. If she agrees with Douglas that the 'first rule' is that 'the impure is that which does not respect boundaries', the 'second rule... sees the impure as the maternal' ([1996] 2000: 21), since the desire for purity is always associated with the desire of the individual to distinguish 'himself' from the pre-objectal relationship, with the mother. Kristeva suggests that the role of women in human sexed reproduction will always be subject to disgust, as a disavowal of the dependence men have on women for their existence. Kristeva's argument that purity and impurity is necessarily associated with psychical matricide and disgust at women's reproductive processes has been well-criticised by subsequent scholars (e.g. Tyler 2009); it nonetheless keeps gender in the fore. Kristeva's emphasis on the links between purity and impurity, reproduction, and gender inequity and Foucault's concern for the enmeshment of truth discourses anchored by the power-relations that organise various institutional sites can be integrated. Social class, the heterosexual family and the nation can each only appear as natural and inevitable if the desires and reproductive bodies which necessarily underpin their continued existence are orchestrated, and this orchestration occluded. Female subjects are coded pure/impure in their position as 'border guards' (Yuval-Davis 1997) for these cultural units: charged with responsibility for reproducing these aspects of identity as ostensive essences, female sexuality becomes situated as the site at which the contingencies that attend the material and discursive construction of essences must be both managed and occluded through social and self-regulation as an ongoing process.

Considered in relation to gender, the Foucauldian reflections on purity and impurity considered here have implications for the practice of resistance. Foucault traces the historical contingency of the suture of themes of purity and impurity to ideas of moral guilt and essential truth, such that purity and impurity come to operate as a measure of moral or epistemological deviation or apostasy. He suggests that, despite great changes over time, such discourses have instantiated and re-activated in powerful discursive formations, such as health and medicine, and in constructions of the nation. As such purity and impurity discourses are not set in stone, but have an obdurateness which is an index of institutional power to distinguish between the acceptable and the unacceptable human beings using

homogeneity/heterogeneity as a measure. Resistance against the rules which organise this sorting, he urges, occurs when subjects work towards ‘seizing those rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them’ (Foucault [1971b] 1998: 378). Yet, facilitated in their operation by relations of power, discourses instantiated by particular actors are always ‘inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures’ within the ‘network of the social’ ([1982b] 2000: 340, 345). As such, Foucault observes, resistance is by degrees bought at a price, and may support or enact its own dangers and forms of domination – including perhaps confirming some elements of the regime it sets out to contest. Grosz (1994: 56-7) draws out this Foucauldian problem well in her observation that those who wish to combat gendered relations of power, ‘are not faced by pure and impure options. All options are in their various ways bound by the constraints of patriarchal power’, and so the ‘crucial political questions’ are to do with ‘what are the costs and benefits of holding these commitments?’ (see also Duschinsky 2014b).

To turn this reflection to the case considered in the introduction, of the global SlutWalk movement, Jones and Black Woman’s Blueprint are surely right to point to the difficulty and danger in trying to reclaim the impure subject-position of ‘slut’ in the face of the history of entrenched and punitive raced and classed formations. Yet SlutWalk International are surely right that their marches have the potential to pervert sexist assumptions, invert their meaning, and redirect them. Foucault’s reflections on purity and impurity, applied to this question draw attention to the temporality of resistance. SlutWalk may have been successful in perverting rape culture in their marches in a way which has lasting effects on assumptions and practices, such as demonstrating refusal of ‘slut’ as a signifier of shame and helping to galvanise identification with feminism among young people. Ringrose and Renold (2012: 340) found that involvement in the SlutWalks had been a ‘critical rupture’ for the school-age girls they interviewed. Yet ‘the luminosity of “slut” as abject signifier’ was also re-established for their interviewees after the march had ended. Ringrose and Renold appeal to Kristeva’s idea of the abject, highlighting the significance of purity and impurity discourses in the limited temporality of the reclaimed slut identity. It can be suggested that the continued embeddedness of female sexuality within purity and impurity regimes which symbolically and literally threaten transgressive subjects has meant that the positive valorisation of ‘slut’ as a subject-position could only flare briefly, compared to the relative success of efforts to reclaim ‘queer’ identity. This flare achieved important goals, but

purity and impurity in the contrast between ‘slut’ and ‘innocent’ are too integral to the storm of threats and promises which organise the processes of gendered subjectivation for the flame to remain alight as an identity-label.

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